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Paul Williamson

Abraham, Israel and the Church

Dr Williamson is Tutor in Old Testament Studies at the Irish Baptist College in Belfast. His article is a revised form of a paper presented to the 1998 Biblical Theology Study Group at Tyndale House, Cambridge.¹

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1. Introduction

One of the obvious contrasts between the Old and New Testaments is that in each the people of God are different. In one God's saving activity focuses primarily on a national entity (i.e. ethnic Israel); in the other such focus centres on an international community (i.e. the global Church). It is clear, however, that New Testament writers considered the national entity to be in many respects a type or foreshadowing of the international community.² Yet some New Testament authors, in particular the Apostle Paul, seem to go much further—suggesting that the reality of the Christian Church was not merely foreshadowed in Israel but was in fact the ultimate climax and goal of the promises made to Abraham.³ In other words, the promises made to Abraham concerned more than the physical nation of Israel; their supreme focus was on something far greater and more extensive: the international community of faith.⁴

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the following for their constructive criticism of earlier drafts: Desi Alexander, Raymond Banks, Robert Gordon, David Luke and Patricia Poots. In addition, I wish to thank the original audience for their helpful and encouraging comments.

2 E.g. Paul's allegorical analogy between believers and Isaac (Gal. 4:22–31); the warning to believers against making the same mistakes as the ancient Israelites made (Heb. 3:12–4:11; 1 Cor. 10:1–11); the application to believers of language used in the OT to define Israel (2 Cor. 6:16–18; 1 Pet. 2:9).

3 E.g. Acts 3:25; Rom. 4:16–24; Gal. 3:6–9, 16, 29; cf. section 4 below.

4 Admittedly, not all interpreters agree with my reading of the relevant texts; cf. the recent symposium edited by H. W. House (*Israel The Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God's Promises*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998) which essentially maintains that the promises relating to Israel have not been fulfilled in the Church, but will be realized at the end of the age. It seems to me, however, that the contributors to this book have overlooked some key texts (e.g. Mt. 5:5; Rom. 4:13) which seriously undermine the 'literal hermeneutic' upon which their sharp dichotomy between Israel and the Church is based.

An important question naturally arises from this: 'How has this gulf between the nation of Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ been bridged?' Did New Testament interpreters such as Paul perform exegetical somersaults to cross the divide? Indeed, must the modern interpreter do likewise in any attempt to defend their hermeneutics? Or is it exegetically defensible to find in the promises given to Abraham the Church of Jesus Christ not merely foreshadowed, but actually anticipated?

To answer these questions three things must be carefully examined: the promises made to Abraham and their development in the book of Genesis; the way these promises are interpreted and refined in the rest of the Old Testament;⁵ the way these promises have been reinterpreted and extended in the New Testament.

2. The Promissory Agenda and its development in Genesis

Within the Abraham narrative there are three core promissory threads:

- a. The Promise of Phenomenal Posterity (i.e. promises relating to 'seed')⁶
- b. The Promise of National Territory (i.e. promises relating to 'land')⁷
- c. The Promise of Global Prosperity (i.e. promises relating to the blessing of other peoples through/in Abraham's seed).⁸

While there are additional promissory elements, the programmatic agenda is basically three-fold: Abraham will have innumerable descendants; these innumerable descendants will inherit a specific parcel of land as their national territory; and through this nation descended from Abraham blessing will extend to all the earth's inhabitants. As the précis of the divine promises to Abraham in Gn. 26:4 suggests, the promissory material within the Abraham narrative is encompassed within the parameters of these three core elements.

5 Throughout this article I have retained the traditional nomenclature for referring to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Following C. R. Seitz (*Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998, ch. 6) I believe that (i) 'Old Testament' is a more accurate title than *Hebrew Bible* for all the material in question; and (ii) the traditional labels are still the best way to convey the complex theological relationship between the two main parts of Christian Scripture (in terms of continuity and discontinuity). Unlike the traditional labels, First and Second Testaments fail to convey this adequately.

6 Cf. Gn. [12:2]; 12:7a; 13:15b-16; 15:4-5, 13-16, 18b; 17:2, 7, 9-10; [18:18a]; 21:12; 22:17a; 24:7.

7 Cf. Gn. 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 18-21; 17:8a; [18:18a]; 22:17b; 24:7.

8 Cf. Gn. 12:3; [17:4-6, 16]; 18:18b; 22:18a.

Within the Abrahamic narrative itself, and indeed within the rest of the book of Genesis, more attention is focused on promises relating to Abraham's posterity than any other. This does not make the other two core aspects less important, but it does underline that the promise of 'seed' was in some sense foundational. Such an inference is clearly a logical one to draw, given that without descendants, there would be no one to inherit the land, nor would there be anyone through whom blessing could be mediated to other people(s). Thus the emphasis in the Abraham narrative on the 'seed' dimension is not surprising.

a. Abraham's phenomenal posterity

While the promise of a 'great nation' in Gn. 12:2 evidently presupposes the promise of numerous descendants, there is no explicit mention of Abraham's descendants or 'seed' until 12:7.⁹ The future reality of Abraham's posterity is again presupposed in 13:15–16 where, for the first time, God explicitly (and rather graphically) promises to make Abraham's descendants innumerable (like the earth's dust, 13:16). This aspect of the promise is reiterated (with a different analogy—the stars in the sky) in 15:4–5, in which God clarifies his intention to produce this innumerable offspring through a physical son of Abraham. Having circumvented the problem of Sarah's infertility in Genesis 16, Abraham (along with the reader) is left with the distinct impression that the innumerable offspring promised to Abraham will come through Ishmael (cf. 16:10). Genesis 17, however, appears to correct this misconception, announcing that God's covenant to make Abraham 'extremely numerous' (17:2) will be established not with Ishmael, but with Isaac (cf. 17:18–21). Ishmael, because of his physical relationship to Abraham, will certainly be increased numerically (Gn. 17:20; cf. 21:13, 18). Nevertheless, the 'great nation' descended from Ishmael is clearly distinguished from the *nations* promised to Abraham through Isaac (cf. Gn. 17:4–6, 16).¹⁰ Thus Genesis 17 differentiates between two lines of Abrahamic descent: a great nation through Ishmael, and multitudinous nations through Isaac.

This latter development is especially significant. Abraham is no longer presented merely as the father of a single nation, albeit one that would be 'great' (Gn. 12:2) and 'numerous' (Gn. 13:16; 15:5); rather, he and Sarah will be forebears of a '*multitude of nations*' (17:4). This

9 Here, as indeed elsewhere, the promise of 'seed' is closely associated with the promise of land; cf. Gn. 13:15–17; 15:4–7, 13–18; 17:7–8; 22:17; 24:7.

10 It is insignificant whether one follows the feminine suffixes reflected in the MT, or adopts the masculine suffixes reflected in the ancient versions and suggested by the *BHS* editors. Either way the sense is the same: the 'nations' will come exclusively through Isaac.

raises the question of how these 'multitudinous nations' (pl.) are related to the 'great nation' (sing.) promised to Abraham in the preceding narrative. Has the original promise of nationhood been expanded to incorporate every nation that could trace its roots back to Abraham? While this interpretation is offered in several commentaries,¹¹ it must surely be rejected, since here Ishmael, and subsequently Esau, are expressly excluded from the line of promise.¹² Therefore, unless the plural is understood simply as hyperbole, the 'multitudinous nations' of Genesis 17 apparently encompass more than those who are physically related to the patriarch.

Attention may actually be drawn to this non-physical sense of Abraham's 'fatherhood' by the way it is expressed in Gn. 17:4.¹³ The extraordinary spelling of the construct noun ('*āb*'), may point to a somewhat unusual connotation of 'fatherhood' here. More significant, however, is the fact that in every other place where a similar construction occurs (i.e. where the inseparable preposition *l*^c is so deployed with the noun, '*āb*'), a non-physical concept of fatherhood is undeniably in view.¹⁴ If such a metaphorical connotation is also intended here, Abraham's fatherhood of these multitudinous nations is not to be understood in terms of his role as their progenitor, but rather, as their benefactor (i.e. as mediator of God's blessing to all the families/nations of the earth). Understood in this way, the multitude of nations spoken of in chapter 17 does not simply foreshadow, but actually anticipates Abraham's spiritual seed (i.e. the international community of faith).

It is clear, nevertheless, that Genesis 17 attaches considerable importance to Abraham's physical descendants as well. This covenant to make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations will be maintained/perpetuated exclusively through Isaac (v. 21). Moreover, a significant role is implied for a royal progeny which will trace its roots back to Abraham through Isaac (vv. 6, 16). Thus Genesis 17 gives the first signal that the multitudinous descendants promised to Abraham would come through Isaac's line.

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- 11 E.g. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, London: Methuen, 1905, 186; H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910, 267; J. Skinner [with qualifications], *Genesis*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930, 291–92; D. Kidner, *Genesis*, Downers Grove: IVP, 129.
- 12 Cf. G. von Rad, *Genesis*, London: SCM, 21972, 200; W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984, 73; T. D. Alexander, 'Abraham Reassessed Theologically' in *He Swore an Oath* edited by R. S. Hess, G. J. Wenham and P. E. Satterthwaite, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, 17.
- 13 Two features are striking: (i) the construct form here is unique; (ii) the inseparable preposition (1) does not mark an indirect object, but is apparently deployed here in a resultative sense; cf. *GKC*, 119*t* and J. C. L. Gibson's somewhat similar description (*Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar—Syntax*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, 150) as 'alternative to the obj. complement.'

Confirmation of this is found in Gn. 21:12 ('it is through Isaac that off-spring shall be named for you').¹⁵ This verse is especially interesting because of the contrast implied in the context (cf. v. 13) between Abraham's physical 'seed' and a special 'seed' traced exclusively through Isaac. While both, because of their Abrahamic ancestry, will expand to national proportions, only Isaac's descendants will perpetuate the line of descent in and through which all God's covenant promises will be realized.

This special status of Isaac in relation to these promises is also implicit in the divine oath of Gn. 22:17–18. The context of this oath in Genesis 22 is clearly significant: the 'near sacrifice' of *Isaac*, who is expressly identified as Abraham's *only* son (vv. 2, 12, 16). The reason given for the making of the oath on this occasion—Abraham's willingness to obey God and sacrifice his *only son, Isaac*—lays emphasis on the same point; Isaac's role in the fulfilment of the divine promises was absolutely crucial.

This observation is further enhanced by the syntactical distinction which Alexander has highlighted between Abraham's multitudinous descendants (22:17a) and a conquering, individual descendant (22:17b–18) through whom all nations shall be blessed.¹⁶ Without Isaac, the line of promise, and along with it, this unique descendant, would perish.

Given Isaac's special promissory status, the introduction of Nahor's family tree in 22:20–24 is not nearly so abrupt or unexpected. The only obvious literary function of this short genealogy is to introduce the reader to Rebecca, through whom the special line of Isaac would be continued.¹⁷ It is unsurprising, therefore, that the remainder of the Abraham narrative should focus primarily on the coming together of Isaac and Rebecca,¹⁸ and Isaac's unique position as Abraham's heir (25:1–11).

In the patriarchal stories that follow, the special line of Abrahamic descent is further refined. The fulfilment of the promises concerning Ishmael is dealt with first (25:12–18), after which attention shifts to the

15 Cf. the somewhat similar phrase in Gn. 48:16, where the idea is clearly that of perpetuating the family name; the idea conveyed here (21:12) is probably quite similar.

16 T. D. Alexander, 'Further Observations on the Term "Seed" in Genesis,' *TB* 48.2 (1997), 363–67.

17 As Wenham observes, the mention of one female grandchild within this male-dominated genealogical snippet raises the reader's expectations (*Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2, Dallas: Word Books, 1994, 119–20). Less plausibly Hamilton suggests that 'the emphasis in this genealogy is on one of the nations of the earth (Nahor's descendants) who find blessing in Abraham's descendants' (*The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50* NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 118).

18 As is clear from 24:67, the death of Sarah (ch. 23) and the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (ch. 24) should be read together as a literary unit.

offspring of Isaac and Rebecca. The mention of 'two nations' and 'two peoples' in 25:23 might initially cause us to reconsider our metaphorical interpretation of the nations in Gn. 17: could these two nations in Rebecca's womb be the beginning of a physical fulfilment? As the story unfolds, however, the nation descended from Esau is gradually ruled out of the reckoning, and the reader's attention is skilfully directed to the family line of Jacob.¹⁹ Jacob's role as sole inheritor of the promises made to Abraham is confirmed in 28:13–16, in which all three core promises (i.e. specific territory, innumerable posterity, and international prosperity) are reiterated. In the subsequent revelation at Bethel (Gn. 35:9–15) the promise of royal progeny is added, further verifying that the special line of Abrahamic descent will be traced exclusively through Jacob. While the promise of international prosperity is not stated explicitly in Genesis 35, a distinction is drawn between a 'nation' and a 'company of nations' that will come from Jacob (v. 11).²⁰ Thus two different prospects are again anticipated: a national entity and an international community.

In the ensuing narrative the number of Abraham's physical descendants continues to increase, although significantly, not without obstacles being divinely removed.²¹ Thus the point is subtly made that the continuity of the promised line of descent was maintained by God. By the conclusion of the Jacob cycle (i.e. Genesis 35) Jacob's progeny has expanded to twelve sons. The order in which these are recorded (Gn. 35:23–26) is probably significant: Leah's sons; Rachel's sons; the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid; the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid. The fact that the first three of Leah's sons have already been presented in a rather negative light (cf. Gn. 34:25; 35:22) will not be lost on the attentive reader.

Before presenting his family history of Jacob (Gn. 37:2ff.), the narrator first traces that of the elder son to whom the covenant promises did

19 Cf. the words of the blessing conferred on Jacob in 27:28–29, and subsequently, in 28:3–4. In both texts, especially the latter, there are very strong allusions to the promises made to Abraham (e.g. international significance; fertility and phenomenal expansion; specific territory). By contrast, the blessing conferred on Esau is analogous to the promises made to Ishmael (compare 27:39–40 with 16:12).

20 So T. D. Alexander, 'Abraham Reassessed,' 17–18. Hamilton (*Genesis 18–50*, 381) *et al.* interpret the second clause as qualifying the first (i.e. 'a nation, that is, a company of tribes'); cf. N. Sarna, *Genesis JPS Torah Commentary*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989, 242; R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, New York/London: W. W. Norton, 1996, 197. As the latter commentators acknowledge, however, there is some allusion here to the multitudinous nations of Genesis 17. This may suggest, therefore, that like the multitudinous nations of Abraham, this company of nations will not be related to Jacob in a physical sense.

21 It is not a coincidence that God had to overcome infertility problems in the case of the first two matriarchs (cf. Gn. 11:30; 21:1–2; 25:21), and is explicitly said to have opened the wombs of Leah (29:31; cf. 30:17) and Rachel (30:22).

not apply (Genesis 36).²² The purpose of this genealogy seems to be similar to that relating to Ishmael in 25:12–18. Just as the latter alludes to the fulfilment of God's promises made in relation to (non-elect) Ishmael, so Genesis 36 alludes to the fulfilment of God's promises made in relation to (non-elect) Esau (cf. 27:39–40). Moreover, as Wenham astutely observes, both this genealogy and the earlier one relating to Ishmael (Gn. 25:12–18) draw attention to the fact that the non-elect descendants settled outside the Promised Land, and are thus excluded from the line of promise.²³ It is not extraordinary, therefore, that the remainder of the Patriarchal Story focuses exclusively on the family history of Jacob's sons, four of whom are singled out for special attention (i.e. Joseph, Reuben, Judah, and Benjamin). Of these four, Judah is possibly the most significant, in that the Joseph story is abruptly interrupted by an episode in which Judah's 'seed' occupies centre stage. While the full significance of the brief liaison between Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar is only later disclosed (cf. Ru. 4:18; Mt. 1:3), the remarkable birth of twins has striking similarities with the birth story of Jacob and Esau (25:24–26). This analogy between Jacob and Perez, as well as the emphasis on Judah's 'seed,' may thus imply a special role in the promissory agenda for Judah.²⁴ Genesis 38 thus provides yet another illustration of God's providence operating in the establishment of the special line of Abrahamic descent.

While the subsequent Joseph narrative is concerned primarily with how Jacob's extended family came to settle in Egypt, at least some attention is focused on their future numerical growth (47:27; 48:16; cf. 48:4). From 48:19 it appears that Jacob is doing more than simply adopting Ephraim and Manasseh as his heirs. Rather, Jacob invests Ephraim with preferential status, and in a way that is clearly reminiscent of the promise of multitudinous nations in 17:4–6 and 35:11.²⁵ Given the narrative pattern up to this point,²⁶ and the explicit association of a 'plethora of nations' with Ephraim, one might reasonably conclude that Abraham's multitudinous descendants will be traced primarily through Ephraim.

22 Cf. the short family history of Ishmael introduced at a similar point in the narrative in Genesis 25.

23 *Genesis 16–50*, 341. Hamilton's suggestion (*Genesis 18–50*, 401) that the Edomite king list may allude to the promise of 17:6, 16 is not convincing. As Hamilton himself notes, this promissory aspect was reiterated in the previous chapter to Jacob (35:11), whereas no such promise was made in the case of Esau. Rather, this seems to have been part and parcel of the very birthright he despised and the blessing from which he was excluded.

24 As suggested, for example, by T. D. Alexander, 'Messianic Ideology in Genesis' in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, edited by P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham, Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Baker, 1995, 34.

25 Manasseh will become 'a people,' whereas Ephraim will be 'full of nations.'

26 Especially in relation to younger sons taking precedence over their elder brothers.

However, it is evident from ch. 49 that Ephraim will not have a monopoly on the divine promises. While the 'blessing' announced by Jacob on some of his sons offered little by way of encouragement,²⁷ the extended and positive message for both Judah and Joseph indicates that Ephraim is not the only descendant through whom the promises made to Abraham will be fulfilled. Since this is the second time that Judah has come into focus, the reader is again alerted to his special significance in the fulfilment of God's promises. This is especially underlined by the regal imagery in 49:8–10, which stirs up memories of the royal progeny promised in 17:6, 16 and 35:11.

Thus two of Jacob's sons come into particular focus, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that promises made to Abraham will be realized in some special sense through Ephraim and Judah. The Patriarchal Narrative seems, therefore, to be anticipating a prominent role for both Ephraim and Judah in the subsequent history of Abraham's 'seed.'

By the end of Genesis Abraham's descendants have begun to increase numerically (Gn. 46:26–27; 50:21). Even so, this numerical expansion is nowhere near the colossal extent anticipated within the promissory texts themselves, and thus the promises relating to Abraham's phenomenal posterity clearly await fulfilment. With the other core promises the situation is much the same.

b. Abraham's national territory

Unlike the promise of 'seed,' there is not even a partial fulfilment of the promise of national territory within the Abraham narrative.²⁸

27 Cf. the altogether negative words addressed to Reuben, Simeon and Levi, vv. 3–7.

28 Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had never anything more than 'permanent resident status.' The burial plot which Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite (apparently at an exorbitantly inflated price) can in no sense (*pace* Wenham) constitute a 'first step toward Abraham and his descendants' acquisition of the whole land of Canaan' (*Genesis 16–50*, 130; cf. the similar inferences made by G. von Rad, *Genesis*, London: SCM, 1972, 250; W. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Atlanta: John Know Press, 1982, 196; J. G. Janzen, *Genesis 12–50: Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Handsel, 1993, 83). As Turner (*Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, Sheffield: SAP, 1990, 103) suggests, quite the reverse is true: 'The non-fulfilment of the land promise in Abraham's lifetime is underlined by the negotiations he has with Ephron' Yahweh had promised to give the land. If buying could be construed as fulfilling the promise, one wonders why Abraham 'laden down with this world's goods' had not similar offers for desirable properties before 'His purchase of this small plot simply emphasizes the non-fulfilment of the promise.' Cf. the comments of D. Kidner (*Genesis*, Leicester: IVP, 1967, 145), G. W. Coats (*Genesis With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 164), A. P. Ross (*Creation and Blessing*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, 411–12) in a similar vein. This does not detract, however, from the fact that burial of the Patriarchs and their families in the Promised Land was an act of faith in the eventual fulfilment of the promise.

Rather, this dimension of the promise is explicitly deferred: in Gn. 12:7 (the first explicit reference to the promise of territory) God promises to give the land, not to Abraham personally, but to his *descendants*. Significantly, in answer to Abraham's query about the land in Gn. 15:8 ('How can I know that I shall gain possession of it?'), God responds by making a solemn oath to give the land 'to Abraham's descendants' (Gn. 15:18).²⁹ The promise of land is again explicitly associated with Abraham's descendants in Abraham's recollection of Yahweh's promise in Gn. 24:7.³⁰

On two occasions, though, Yahweh does appear to suggest that Abraham himself will possess the land (Gn. 13:15–17; 17:8). However, while a cursory reading of these verses may suggest that Abraham will personally inherit the territory, it is possible to read the text quite differently. The conjunction linking Abraham and his 'seed' in both Gn. 13:15 and 17:8 should probably be read as a *vav explicativum* ('All the land that you see I will give to you, [that is] to your offspring for ever').³¹ Such an explicative/explanatory reading certainly explains: (a) why the promise of land is explicitly restricted to Abraham's descendants in the rest of the Abraham narrative; and (b) why the promise of territory was never realized in relation to Abraham personally.³² Thus, if the *vav* connecting Abraham and his descendants in Gn. 13:15 and 17:8 is understood in this explanatory sense, the Abraham narrative consistently maintains that the promise of land will not be realized within Abraham's lifetime, but only at a future time by his *descendants*.

As the ancestral history unfolds, the promise of specific territory is never far from the surface. The short amount of space allocated to Isaac (Genesis 26) focuses largely on territorial intrigue. Forced by famine to travel south, Isaac is prohibited from migrating any further than the region of the Negev, over which Philistines had staked territorial claims.³³ Significantly, however, this region is now expressly

29 If 'possessing the gate of his enemies' (Gn. 22:17) is an allusion to conquest of the Promised Land, here too possession of the land is restricted to Abraham's *seed*.

30 Cf. the *précis* in Gn. 26:4–5.

31 As tentatively suggested by L. A. Turner in relation to Gn. 17:8 (*Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, 102). For this phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew, see GKC, § 154a *fn.*b (484); D. W. Baker, 'Further Examples of the *Waw Explicativum*,' *VT* 30 (1980) 129–36; Waltke-O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990 § 39.2.1.b (648–9); J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar Syntax*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, §37 (37).

32 The singular suffix on the preposition *l* in 13:17 does not detract from my interpretation of 13:15 as a second qualifying clause would have been unnecessary in the immediate context.

33 As Hamilton (*Genesis 18–50*, 192–3) underlines, the prohibition (26:2) carries temporary rather than absolute force. Fulfilment of these promises was not permanently tied in with keeping out of Egypt. Rather, ultimately the fulfilment of the promise of land necessitated relocation in Egypt (cf. Gn. 15:13–16).

incorporated within the promise of land (26:3–4).³⁴ Thus here the territorial promise made to Abraham encompasses ‘all these lands.’ Nevertheless, it remains an unfulfilled promise, for, as Turner wryly remarks, ‘no amount of digging and re-digging of wells can be seen as bringing it [i.e. possession of the land] any closer.’³⁵ Indeed, a careful reading of vv. 3–4 suggests once more that it is not the patriarch himself, but rather his descendants, who will inherit the allotted territory.³⁶

Unlike Isaac, Jacob forsakes the Promised Land altogether, yet without jeopardising the territorial promise. Rather, both on his outbound and return journeys, this is one of the promissory aspects expressly communicated to him (cf. 28:13; 35:12). Once again, the mention of descendants may serve to qualify the sense in which Jacob himself would be given the land;³⁷ like his predecessors, Jacob could not expect to be anything more than a sojourner in the land in his own lifetime.³⁸ As mentioned above, the only obvious theological purpose served by the Esau genealogy in Genesis 36 is to highlight the fact that Esau, in contrast to Jacob, had settled outside the Promised Land and thus forfeited all claim to the territorial promise. This major theological point is muddled by the rather unfortunate narrative break inserted after 36:43 in the MT and carried over into our English versions.³⁹ It is nevertheless clear that 37:1 belongs to the preceding pericope, rather than the Jacob cycle introduced by the *wāḥ dōt* formula in 37:2. Moreover, as Turner has perceptively observed,⁴⁰ when this contrast between Esau and Jacob is examined more closely, a further difference can be discerned: whereas the Edomites take possession of their land (36:43), Jacob remains a sojourner in the territory promised to his descendants (37:1).

34 As Turner observes, ‘While 15.18–19 had promised a huge tract of land to Abraham’s descendants the land of the Philistines had not been included explicitly . . . However, once Isaac becomes a sojourner there, Philistia too is promised to Isaac and his descendants’ (*Announcements*, 137).

35 *Announcements*, 137.

36 The conjunction in 26:3 may again carry an explicative force; such a reading would account for the sole mention of Isaac’s descendants as the recipients in the following verse (v. 4).

37 The connecting *vav* in these texts may also have an explanatory function.

38 As with Sarah’s burial plot, Turner is surely correct in his observation that Jacob’s purchase of a campsite (33:18–20) ‘falls far short of receiving the *gift* of land’ (*Announcements*, 138 italics his). Moreover, as he further notes, ‘The repeated land promise in 35.12 is a reminder of the unfulfilled agenda . . . Yahweh’s promise, containing a three-fold repetition of *nātan* places the gift of land to Jacob and his descendants in the future, which necessitates a qualified interpretation of the *qal perfect* used of Abraham and Isaac’ (*ibid.*, 138).

39 Indeed, if as Wenham (*Genesis 16–50*, 337) *et al.* assume, 37:1 originally followed directly on 36:8, the contrast between Esau’s departure from Canaan and Jacob’s remaining there to inherit the territory as promised is even more explicit.

40 *Announcements*, 138–9.

In the remainder of the book of Genesis the promise of land assumes a less prominent role. Rather ironically, Jacob and his family are granted a 'holding' (i.e., a royal land grant) in Egypt (47:11).⁴¹ However, the greater prize of Canaan is again brought into focus in 48:4, and as Hamilton suggests,⁴² this may serve to highlight that the experience in Egypt is but a foreshadowing of what God will do for Jacob's descendants in Canaan.

The territorial promise, however, does not disappear totally. Rather, it is recalled at significant junctures in the narrative: before Jacob pronounces his blessing on Manasseh and Ephraim (48:4); and in the context of the death of both Jacob (49:29–32) and Joseph (50:24–25). Thus Genesis ends on a high note of expectation with regard to the promise of national territory. This promise remains unfulfilled, but the stage has been set for the first prerequisite established in Gn. 15:13–14: oppression of Abraham's descendants in a foreign land.

c. *Global prosperity*

Tracing the development and realization of the third main aspect of the promissory agenda of Gn. 12:1–3 (global prosperity) is complicated by notorious difficulties in translation. Should *nibr'ku*, (12:3) be translated passively (i.e. 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you') or reflexively (i.e. 'by you all the families of the earth shall *bless themselves*')? This is not the place to rehearse the arguments marshalled by supporters of either interpretation. Suffice to say that the most plausible solution advanced so far is to give the niphāl here a 'middle' sense,⁴³ i.e. 'win/find blessing.'

To what extent, therefore, was such a promise fulfilled in the book of Genesis? Within the Abraham narrative the patriarch's relationships with foreign peoples come into focus on at least five occasions (cf. Gn. 12:10–20; 14; 18–19; 20–21; 23). In few of these encounters with

41 As Wenham suggests (*Genesis 16–50*, 312), the use of the cognate verb by Hamor in his generous offer of territorial rights (Gn. 34:10) alludes to the divine promise of territory (cf. 17:8; 48:4). The use of the term here highlights that Jacob is granted (temporarily) in the land of Egypt what he had been promised (permanently) in relation to the land of Canaan (cf. the use of the term *ʿōlām* in association with the latter).

42 *Genesis 18–50*, 629.

43 As suggested, for example, by the following scholars: O. Procksch, *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt*, Leipzig: Deicherische Verlags-buchhandlung, ²1924, 97; H. W. Wolff, 'The Kerygma of the Yahwist,' *Interp.* 20:2 (1966), 137 n.31; W. Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979, 40; W. J. Dumbrell, 'The Covenant with Abraham,' *Ref. Theol. Review* (1982), 49; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* WBC1, Waco: Word Books, 1987, 266 n. 3; J. J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992, 110.

foreigners, however, does Abraham appear to mediate blessing/prosperity to anyone. His response to the crises faced by Sodom and Gomorrah appears, on both occasions, to have been motivated primarily by a vested interest in the welfare of his relative, Lot (cf. 14:14–16; 19:29). On neither occasion, apparently, was it Abraham's objective to mediate blessing to these 'nations.' As for his encounters with Pharaoh and Abimelech, it is Abraham who finds blessing (in terms of physical prosperity) through contact with these foreign dignitaries.⁴⁴ Admittedly, in the latter episode (Genesis 20) Abraham is also an agent of blessing (cf. v. 17). However, it is surely stretching the imagination to see in this an illustration or realization of the promise of global prosperity.⁴⁵ After all, 'the "blessing" which ensues is merely the lifting of the plague induced by Abraham's own behaviour.'⁴⁶

The only place where Abraham appears to communicate anything unselfishly to foreigners is in Gn. 14:18–20, his encounter with Melchizedek.⁴⁷ Given the thrust of Gn. 12:3a, such a reciprocal 'blessing' is to be expected at this point. Even so, this is still a far cry from what can be construed as a fulfilment of Gn. 12:3b.

In the stories of Isaac and Jacob such international blessing is equally difficult to discern. While the Philistines recognize Isaac's prosperity (26:12–16), there is no suggestion that they themselves benefited from it in any way. Admittedly, the point is made that Laban did benefit physically from Jacob's special status before God (30:27,30). Nevertheless, as Turner reminds us, 'Laban is Jacob's kith and kin—not a representative of the nations.'⁴⁸ Moreover, when Jacob does come into contact with non-relations back in Canaan, the encounter proves disastrous for the Shechemites.

It is only in the Joseph narrative that one can detect even a remote fulfilment of the promise of global blessing. Unlike his predecessors, Joseph mediates blessing to practically everyone with whom he comes into contact: Potiphar's household (39:4ff.); the prison warder (39:21–23); Pharaoh (41:46ff.); the nation of Egypt (41:56); and, finally (and most significantly) all the earth (41:57). Thus in Joseph we see a measure of blessing being communicated to 'all the

44 As expressly stated in Gn. 12:16 and 20:14–16; cf. 21:23.

45 Pace Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 74–75. The literary and theological thrust of this episode seems to be, rather, the irony of such a prayer being answered in the case of other women, but not Sarah! The episode clearly discloses that Sarah's childlessness was not due to any inability of God's to remove her barrenness (so Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50* BST, Leicester: IVP, 83, and Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 71).

46 Turner, *Announcements*, 110.

47 Pace Turner (*Announcements*, 107), who maintains that there is no sequel to Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham. Turner overlooks the fact that Abraham reciprocates by giving the king of Salem 'one tenth of everything' (v. 20).

48 *Announcements*, 140.

families/nations of the earth/world.' Even here, however, such fulfilment is only partial, indeed rather anticlimactic in terms of the global prosperity anticipated through Abraham's offspring. Moreover, Gn. 18:18–19 appears to establish at least one important prerequisite for the 'blessing of the nations' which had not been realized in Joseph's lifetime (i.e. the establishment of a national entity descended from Abraham). Thus by the end of Genesis, one is left with the impression that, like the other programmatic promises given to Abraham, the promise of global prosperity has not begun to be realized, at least to any significant extent.

It would seem, therefore, that none of the three core promises made to Abraham has attained any measure of significant fulfilment by the end of the Patriarchal Narratives. While the descendants of Abraham have expanded to some seventy people, they are a far cry from the multitudinous number anticipated in the relevant promissory texts. The territorial inheritance promised to Abraham is, geographically speaking, further away than ever. And instead of mediating blessing on a world-wide scale, Abraham's descendants are now dependent on the hospitality and support of a foreign power, albeit under the influence of one of their own family members. Thus for the fulfilment of these core promises to Abraham we must look beyond the book of Genesis to the books that follow.

3. The partial realization of the promissory agenda in the Old Testament

As each of the three core promises is traced through the rest of the Old Testament it becomes clear that even here fulfilment is at most partial; a complete realization is neither finally nor permanently established, leaving the distinct impression that an even greater culmination of God's promises to Abraham still remains.

a. Partial realization of the posterity promise

The Book of Exodus begins by emphasizing that the initial fulfilment of the promise relating to 'seed' had been greatly surpassed during the period of the stay in Egypt (1:6–10). Moreover, the realization of this promissory aspect could not be thwarted—even by the policy of ethnic cleansing instituted by a new regime in Egypt (cf. 1:11–12, 20; 5:5).

Abraham's phenomenal expansion is further underlined by the notoriously large numbers given in Ex. 12:37 for the Exodus generation, and subsequently by the census figures in the Book of Numbers. While efforts by some scholars to scale down the figures concerned and arrive at a more plausible grand total are not lacking

in ingenuity,⁴⁹ such concerns may inadvertently obscure the narrator's underlying theological point: the phenomenal expansion of Abraham's seed.⁵⁰

As well as these possible allusions, however, the promise of innumerable descendants is mentioned more explicitly in a number of Mosaic contexts.⁵¹ While such texts highlight an initial degree of fulfilment, it is nevertheless clear that a further (and more distant) culmination of this promise is anticipated (cf. Dt. 1:11; 30:4-5). Thus the promise of innumerable posterity has not been fully exhausted even by the end of the Pentateuch.

There are several allusions to the promise of phenomenal posterity in the rest of the Old Testament and in the Apocryphal books.⁵² While a cursory reading of all this material might lead one to conclude that this promissory aspect has ultimately been fulfilled in Israel's history, two of these texts suggest otherwise: Is. 48:19 implies that the full potential of this promise had not been realized in pre-exilic times; in a similar vein Ho. 1:10-11 associates the realization of this promise with an anticipated reunification of Judah and Israel under a single leader.⁵³ Several other prophetic texts likewise project the promise of numerical increase into the post-exilic period and associate it with the blessings anticipated in a new covenant era (e.g. Je. 23:3; Ezk. 36:10-11, 37-38; 37:26).⁵⁴

Thus Abraham's 'seed' has begun to materialize within the Pentateuch, initially in the Abraham narrative itself (with the birth of Isaac)

49 E.g. W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai* (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, Ltd., 1906), 207ff.; G. E. Mendenhall, 'The Census of Numbers 1 and 26,' *JBL* 77 (1958), 52-66; R. E. D. Clark, 'The Large Numbers of the Old Testament,' *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87 (1955), 82-92; John Wenham, 'The Large Numbers of the Old Testament,' *TB* 18 (1967), 19-53 and, most recently, Colin Humphreys, 'The Number of People in the Exodus From Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI,' *VT* 48:2, (1998), 196-213. All these scholars agree that the Hebrew term *'elep* means something other than 'a thousand' in texts relating to the Exodus population. For a concise review of other solutions proposed, see Humphreys, 197-99.

50 Cf. Nu. 16:49; 22:3ff.; 25:9. Even the deflated figures for the Exodus generation suggested by Humphreys *et al.* are fully congruent with such a theological point in relation to the promise of multitudinous descendants.

51 E.g. Ex. 32:13 (Golden calf incident); Nu. 10:36 (Israel's movements); 23:10 (Balaam's first oracle); Dt. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62 (Moses' speeches to Israel).

52 E.g. 2 Sa. 17:11; 1 Ki. 4:20; Is. 10:22; 48:19; 51:2; [Je. 15:8]; Ho. 1:10; [Hab. 1:9]; Ne. 9:23; 1 Ch. 27:23; 2 Ch. 1:9; Sir. 44:21; Prayer of Azariah 1:13.

53 The latter text is especially significant in view of the use made of it by Paul in Rom. 9:25-26; cf. 1 Pet. 2:10.

54 Admittedly the 'new' covenant is not mentioned explicitly in the immediate context of Je. 23:3 (cf. Ezk. 37:26). Even so, the new era of 30-31 is clearly the context of the promises related in ch. 23, as a comparison with the material in Ezk. 36-37 appears to confirm.

and more fully in the rapid expansion of Abraham's progeny by the time of the Exodus. Further realization is reflected in the census figures in Numbers, and in the later population figures of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire. Yet there is at least some indication in the prophetic literature that this dimension of the divine promise has not been finally realized, the ultimate fulfilment being still future, making the New Testament appropriation of this promise not so forced as one might otherwise conclude.

b. Partial realization of the territorial promise

As noted earlier, by the end of Genesis the first prerequisite for the inheritance of the Promised Land has been met: Abraham's descendants have become 'aliens in a land that is not theirs' (Gn. 15:13). Exodus begins by illustrating how the second prerequisite (the slavery and oppression of Abraham's descendants, Gn. 15:13b) materialized when a new Dynasty established itself over Egypt.⁵⁵ Moreover, as the story progresses the stage is further set for the promised deliverance of Gn. 15:14.⁵⁶ Thus the Exodus marks the initial step towards the realization of the inheritance of the Promised Land by Abraham's descendants.⁵⁷

It becomes increasingly evident, however, that certain conditions were attached to possessing and retaining possession of the allotted territory.⁵⁸ Thus even before the land is inherited, ominous threats of devastation and disinheritance have been aired.⁵⁹ Also held out, however, is the prospect of repatriation and repossession of the Promised Land (cf. Dt. 30:1-5). In relation to the territorial promise, therefore, the post-patriarchal picture projected in the Pentateuch is one of partial fulfilment; while initial fulfilment is presented as being imminent, the prospects of future dispossession and subsequent repossession suggest that the ultimate realization of this promise lies in a more distant future.

The rest of the Old Testament essentially reflects this same pattern: partial fulfilment, followed by dispossession and subsequent repossession.⁶⁰ Thus the rather idealistic statements of complete fulfilment in

55 Cf. Ex. 1:11-14; 2:23-25; 3:7-10.

56 Cf. Ex. 3:16-22; 6:2-8; 7:1-5; 11:1-3.

57 Cf. Ex. 12:25, 35-36; 13:5, 11; 20:12; 23:23-33; 32:13; 33:1-3; Nu. 10:29; 11:12; Dt. 1:8, 21-22; 4:38; 6:23; 10:11.

58 Cf. Ex. 20:12; Lv. 18:3, 24-27; Dt. 4:1-5, 40; 5:33; 6:18; 8:1; 11:8ff.; 16:20; 18:9-14; 19:8-9; 21:23; 24:4; 25:15; 30:16; 32:47. Similar conditions are reflected in Israel's contemplative literature; e.g. Ps. 37 (esp. vv. 9, 11, [18], 22, 29, 34); Pr. 2:21-22; 10:30.

59 Cf. Lv. 18: 28-30; 20:22-24; 25:18; 26:14-40; Dt. 4:25-26; 8:18-20; 28:21-24, 63; 29:21-28; 30:17-18.

60 A similar pattern of possession—dispossession—repossession is found in the apocryphal material (e.g. Bar. 4:27-35).

Joshua (e.g. 21:43–45; 23:14) are tempered with the more realistic picture presented elsewhere (cf. Jos. 13–19; Jdg. 1–2), which for Hess ‘anticipates the terrible truth that God’s judgment for Israel’s failure is coming.’⁶¹

Without question; the fulfilment of the territorial promise in the time of Solomon was certainly more comprehensive (cf. 1 Ki. 4:21, 24). But, as the references to Solomon’s lifetime (vv. 21, 25) may imply, even this was not the permanent possession of the land suggested in Gn. 17:8. Therefore, even while highlighting aspects of the Abrahamic promise that have been realized,⁶² the narrator subtly alludes to a bleaker future for Abraham’s descendants which was to culminate in their ignominious expulsion from the Promised Land.⁶³

This latter prospect is anticipated especially in Israel’s Prophetic Literature.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, such exile from the Promised Land was not the end of the story; the prophets lay equal if not greater stress on the subsequent reversal of this climactic divine judgment.⁶⁵

The beginning of such reversal is clearly heralded in the post-exilic literature.⁶⁶ Restoration and repossession of the land on a much greater scale, however, was anticipated.⁶⁷ Yet despite the political intrigue and military campaigns during the inter-testamental period this aspiration remained unrealized. Thus, like the promise of multitudinous descendants, the territorial dimension of the Abrahamic promise was never fully exhausted in the Old Testament era.

c. Partial realization of the global promise (?)

Of the three core promissory threads, this is certainly the most difficult for which to find any degree of fulfilment within the Old Testament. The post-patriarchal material in the Pentateuch places more emphasis

61 R. S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* TOTC, Leicester/Downers Grove: IVP, 1996, 286. Following Mitchell (*Together in the Land: A Reading of the Book of Joshua* Sheffield: SAP, 1993, 103–104) Hess suggests that the promises were realized only in relation to the destruction of the nations as a combined military force.

62 Promissory threads from the Abraham narrative are clearly picked up here; cf. 1 Ki. 4:20 and Gn. 22:17; 1 Ki. 4:21, 24 and Gn. 15:19.

63 Cf. the ominous observation about the size of Solomon’s cavalry force (v. 26) with the prohibition of Dt. 17:16.

64 Cf. Is. 6:11–12; Je. 4:7, 20, 26–27; 5:19; 6:18; 7:34; 10:22; 12:11–14; 15:15; 16:13; 17:4; 24:10; 25:9–11; 27:10; 45:4; 50:3; Ezk. 6:14; 7:2, 7; 9:9; Ho. 2:3; 9:3; 11:5; Am. 3:11; 5:2; 7:17.

65 Cf. Is. 11:11–16; 14:1; 27:12–13; 35:10; 43:5; 48:20; 52:8; 57:13; 60:21; 61:1ff.; 62:4; 65:16f.; Je. 1:4; 3:16–17; 12:15; 16:14–15; 23:5; 24:5–6; 30:3, 10; 31:8, 16, 23; 32:37f.; 46:27; Ezk. 11:15–17; 34:13f.; 36:6f.; 36:24; 37:12, 21–22; 47:13ff.; Ho. 1:10–11; Am. 9:15; Zc. 10:6ff.

66 E.g. 2 Ch. 36:22–23; Ezr. 1–2.

67 E.g. Zc. 2:11–12; 14:9ff.

on Israel's national distinctiveness than her international significance.⁶⁸ The latter, however, is perhaps alluded to in Deuteronomy, where fiscal dependence on Israel is anticipated.⁶⁹ Apart from this, the only other clear allusion to the prosperity aspect of the Abrahamic promise is found in the third of Balaam's oracles (Nu. 24:9; cf. Gn. 12:3a).

The rest of the Old Testament appears to suggest that, with the possible exception of Solomon's 'Golden Age,' the 'blessing of the nations' remained an unrealized hope for the duration of the period covered by the Old Testament.⁷⁰ Certainly in the Prophetic Literature such a prospect was envisaged as still future.⁷¹ The same future orientation is reflected in Ps. 72:17—a psalm in which there are very clear allusions to the Abrahamic promise; the role formerly associated with Abraham and his seed is assumed by the Psalmist to have been inherited by this ideal Davidic king.

As this brief overview of the relevant Old Testament material has illustrated, while the core aspects of the Abrahamic promise have attained some degree of realization within the Old Testament, a more complete fulfilment of each promissory element is nevertheless anticipated. It is this note of expectation that the New Testament authors utilise in their proclamation of fulfilment in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. New Testament Use of the Promissory Strands of the Abraham Narrative

a. Abraham's 'Seed'

In the New Testament the 'seed' of Abraham has been enlarged to encompass many more than those physically descended from the Patriarch. Clearly important are the comments of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:9 || Lk. 3:8) and Jesus (Mt. 8:11–12 || Lk. 13:28f.; Jn. 8:31–41; cf. Lk. 16:24–25), dismissing mere physical descent from Abraham as insignificant, as also are statements in a similar vein made by James (Acts 15:14–19) and Paul (e.g. Rom. 4:9–17; 9:6f., 24–26; Gal. 3:7, 26–29; 6:15–16). Also significant is the stress on the incredible growth

68 E.g. Ex. 19:5–6; Lv. 18:3; Dt. 12:29–32; 18:9–14; 26:19; 28:1ff.

69 Cf. Dt. 15:4–6; 28:11–12.

70 While it is possible to locate a partial realization during Solomon's reign (1 Ki. 9:26–10:25; cf. 4:34), this was certainly short-lived; moreover, it is difficult to harmonise the national debt accumulated by Solomon with the financial situation anticipated in Deuteronomy. Thus the heyday of the Solomonic era was nothing more than a foreshadowing of the ultimate realization of the promise of international blessing mediated through Abraham's seed.

71 Cf. Is. 19:24–25; Je. 4:2; Zc. 8:13, 20ff.

of the Apostolic Church in Acts (cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:1, 7; 11:21; 14:1) and the numerical size of the Church Triumphant in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 7:9; 14:1, 3; 19:1, 6). It is not difficult to see how this global community of faith—incorporating both Israel and the nations—could be construed as the ultimate fulfilment of the promise to make Abraham's descendants into an innumerable multitude. Thus the phenomenal growth of Abraham's physical descendants in the Old Testament is a paradigm for the innumerable multitude of Abraham's spiritual descendants, the family of faith. While the latter are not all physical descendants of Abraham, they are all united to him through Jesus, one who is Abraham's 'seed' in the fullest possible sense.⁷²

b. Abraham's inheritance

In the New Testament the land of Israel is merely the stage of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The promise of specific territory is generally ignored altogether. Where it is alluded to, it is either spiritualized as the ultimate heavenly rest (Heb. 4:1ff.; 11:16 cf. 11:10), or globalized to become a promise of inheriting the earth/world to come (e.g. Mt. 5:5; Rom. 4:13; Heb. 1:2; cf. Eph. 6:3).⁷³ Admittedly, the key phrase in Rom. 4:13 ('that he/they should be the heir[s] of the world') is open to other interpretations.⁷⁴ However, if Paul is indeed alluding specifically to the territorial promise in the ancestral history, as many interpreters suggest,⁷⁵ then it appears that he, like some inter-testamental

⁷² Cf. Mt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16.

⁷³ The eschatological $\bar{\alpha}\nu\tau\eta$ which the meek will inherit must surely be the New Earth of which Peter speaks (2 Pet. 3:13; cf. Rev. 21–22); cf. the concise discussion in W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* Vol.1 ICC, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 450–51. If so, the promise of land (Ps. 37:11) has been broadened to encompass the whole earth, as is apparently so in Rom 4:13.

⁷⁴ E.g. Morris (L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Leicester: IVP, 1988, 206) relates it more to the promise of Abraham's world-wide family; cf. W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, repr. 1994 (first published by University of California Press in 1974), 176–9. For Moo (D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, 274) it has a more general nuance, encapsulating all that God promised Abraham and his descendants.

⁷⁵ E.g. M. Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971, 21; A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, 281–2; H. K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation*, Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1983, 138–41; J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC36a), Dallas: Word Books, 1988, 213; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Eschatology*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 174; D. E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* Leicester: Apollos, 1995, 103; B. W. Anderson 'Standing on God's Promises: Covenant and Continuity in Biblical Theology,' in *Biblical Theology: Problems & Perspectives—In Honor of J. Christian Beker* edited by S. J. Kraftchick, C. D. Myers, Jr., & B. C. Ollenburger, Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, 154.

writers,⁷⁶ understood the promise of national territory to have more than territorial significance. The land promised to Abraham and his descendants as a permanent possession symbolized or typified something much greater than even the most grandiose borders suggested in the ancestral stories; the ultimate inheritance is one of cosmic, not simply geographical proportions. A similar conclusion is reached even if one follows Cranfield, who, in the light of 1 Cor. 3:21b–23, interprets the ‘heir of the world’ clause as ‘the promise of the ultimate restoration to Abraham and his spiritual seed of man’s inheritance (cf. Gen 1:27f.) which was lost through sin.’⁷⁷ Such an a-territorial reinterpretation of the promise of land is certainly supported by the author of Hebrews (esp. 11:9–10, 13–16), who suggests that even the Patriarchs themselves anticipated something more than a physical parcel of land.⁷⁸ Thus the New Testament allusions to the territorial promise suggest that it encompassed the ultimate physical inheritance of Abraham and his descendants—the New Earth, which Canaan merely foreshadowed. Therefore, just as the promise of multitudinous seed encompasses both Abraham’s physical descendants (the nation of Israel) and his spiritual descendants (all God’s elect), so the promise of physical territory encompasses both the historical inheritance (the land of Canaan) and the eschatological inheritance (the New Earth).

c. Abraham’s ‘blessing of the nations’

The promise of international blessing through the seed of Abraham is interpreted in the New Testament in terms of the Gospel blessings experienced ‘in Christ’ (e.g. Rom. 15: 9ff.; Gal. 3:8–9, 14; cf. the veiled reference in Jn. 8:56). Thus Jesus commissions his disciples to ‘Go . . . and make disciples of *all nations*’ (Mt. 28:19 cf. Lk. 24:47; Acts 1:8). Before the consummation of all things ‘this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed *throughout the world*, as a testimony to *all the nations*’ (Mt. 24:14). At the eschaton ‘*all the tribes of the earth* will mourn’ (Mt. 24:30) and the angels will ‘gather his elect *from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*’ (Mt. 24:31).

It is clear, therefore, that the New Testament takes the physical promises made to Abraham and makes them subservient to the

76 E.g. Sir. 44:21; Jub. 17:3; 22:14; 32:19; Eth. Enoch 5:7. Also cf. Philo: *Som.* 1.175; *Vit. Mos.* 1.155.

77 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* Vol. 1, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 239–40. Such an inheritance must clearly include the physical earth (Gn. 1:28; cf. Mt. 5:5).

78 While few would wish to imply that Abraham perceived of God’s promise from the informed perspective of New Testament eschatology, Hoekema’s conclusion is nevertheless apt: ‘Abraham . . . looked forward to the new earth as the real fulfillment of the inheritance which had been promised him’ . . . and so did the other patriarchs’ (*The Bible and the Future*, 278).

'spiritual promise' the promise of a special relationship with God which will overflow into blessing for all nations (cf. Acts 3:25–26; 13:46–48). However, the physical dimensions of the promise are not only incorporated within the spiritual, but also reinterpreted in terms of something more magnificent and truly eternal.

5. Conclusion

Is the New Testament's (especially the Apostle Paul's) use of the Abraham tradition compatible with grammatico-historical exegesis? Yes, but in such a way that transcends a woodenly literal interpretation of the Old Testament traditions. Whatever label we attach to such a methodology, whether typological, eschatological or canonical,⁷⁹ it is clear that both Testaments complement each other's witness to salvation history. Moreover, both project the final culmination of that salvation history into the future. Thus, just as the national entity descended from Abraham foreshadows the international community, the global Church of Jesus Christ, so the latter foreshadows the ultimate reality anticipated by the promise of multitudinous seed: 'a great multitude that no-one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9).

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between the divine promises in the Abraham narrative and the use made by this Old Testament material in the New Testament. It is argued that the New Testament's reinterpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant (e.g. relating the promise of blessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and applying the promise of multitudinous descendants to the Christian Church) is fully congruous with an exegetical interpretation of the core promissory aspects and their development within the Old Testament.

79 M. Silva defines these as follows: 'typological (because it may focus on correspondences between OT and NT events or individuals), eschatological (because it emphasizes the coming of Christ as bringing in the end times), canonical (because it considers that the full meaning of a text depends on the teaching of Scripture as a whole)' 'Old Testament in Paul' in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* edited by G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin and D. G. Reid, Leicester/Downers Grove: IVP, 1993, 640.